

Climate report says Toronto area needs to cut emissions four times more quickly

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Body

The Greater Toronto Horseshoe Area needs to reduce greenhouse gas emissions four times more quickly than it has been doing in order to reach carbon neutrality by 2050, according to a new report by the agency tasked with fighting climate change and improving air quality in the region.

The report from the Atmospheric Fund - the first of its kind - measured increases and decreases in carbon emissions from Durham Region to Hamilton between 2015 and 2017, across several categories, including buildings, transportation, industry, waste and agriculture.

The report lands as numerous municipal councils in the region have declared climate emergencies, including Toronto city council in October, accelerating Toronto's climate action plan to a target of becoming carbon neutral by 2050.

"There is a yawning gap between our ambitious climate commitments and the scale of climate action on the ground," said Bryan Purcell, the atmospheric fund's vice-president of policy and programs. "We have the talent, the financial capital, and the public support needed to be world leaders in climate action. What we don't have is the time to dither."

The report is aimed at identifying where the problems are in order to engage in change in a targeted way.

The report found that while emissions fell at an average annualized rate of 1.7 per cent between 2015 and 2017, as the regional population grew by nearly a quarter million people, transitioning to carbon neutrality by 2050 requires achieving average annual reductions of seven per cent.

The report is the first of its kind to look at emissions across the entire region over time.

"None of the municipalities in the GTHA function independently. We operate as a region, and our climate policies and programs must reflect that," according to the report.

The report found that the region emitted 49.2 megatonnes of carbon emissions in 2017 - 41 per cent of Ontario's total carbon emissions.

Buildings accounted for 42.8 per cent of the total; transportation accounted for 33.9 per cent; industry 18.9 per cent; waste 3.6 per cent and agriculture .9 per cent.

In fact, buildings and transportation were the largest emission sectors in every municipality in the GTHA, except Hamilton, where industry was the most significant.

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Transportation emissions increased by four per cent between 2015 and 2017, proof that improvements in fuel efficiency and adoption of electric vehicles are not currently rapid enough to offset growth in transportation emissions, according to the report.

SUVs are partly to blame, according to the report. In 2017, 61 per cent of new car sales in Canada were SUVs or pickup trucks, the highest share in the world, according to the report, which recommends consumer incentives and better charging infrastructure for electric vehicles to reduce gas consumption.

The report found that transportation emissions were the highest in Peel Region and in York Region.

Durham Region residents had the highest percentage of long distance commutes - 22.4 travel more than an hour each way to work.

Toronto's high population density - nearly four times higher than Peel, the next densest region in the GTHA, means it has significantly lower per capita transportation emissions, according to the report.

Still, achieving carbon neutrality will require significant changes to Toronto's transportation, the report goes on to say. That includes shifting to electric vehicles for passenger and freight transit and investments in public transit.

The report noted that Toronto could also achieve savings by retrofitting multi-unit residential buildings.

The Atmospheric Fund was formed by the City of Toronto in 1991, funded by a dedicated endowment of \$23 million from land sales, at a time when the city was struggling with significant smog issues. It received another \$17 million from the province in 2016 to encourage a more regional approach. The federal Liberals added \$40 million to the agency's coffers in the last budget.

It offers grants, direct investment in companies engaged in emissions reduction work and runs programs that demonstrate the case for technologies that reduce emissions - it's currently working with Toronto Community Housing to demonstrate the benefits and viability of a multi-residential retrofit of a residential building.

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